

Families Give Thanks

Four adoptions completed in Dobrich's courtroom

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By JOHN EBY
Dowagiac Daily News

CASSOPOLIS -- Theirs are but four stories among 240 on the historic first Thanksgiving-themed Michigan Adoption Day Tuesday.

Ashley Frontczak, 18, had to voluntarily sign court papers certifying her consent because she's older than 14 to complete her adoption by her stepfather, Robert. The Dowagiac cheerleader's celebratory cake was appropriately adorned.

Chad and Jennifer, a Dowagiac couple ages 25 and 27, have a son, Eric, 8, and now Autumn, 2, and Tommy, 18 months. A SpongeBob cake appeared on the courtroom table, emblematic of a ceremony the judge equates to marriage in its ability to create family traditions.

After raising two children of her own, Patricia Withers of Dowagiac is starting over with her grandson, Anthony, 3, whose adoption was completed Tuesday morning before Judge Susan Dobrich in Cass County Family Court. Hot Wheels cars decorated Anthony's cake. Withers was accompanied by Anthony's CASA volunteer, Marge Grochow.

To finalize each adoption, Dobrich asked the parents if their decision was well-thought-out.

"I know you've already morally accepted this responsibility, but are you ready today to accept the responsibility of providing full support?" from education to medical care.

"You understand if something unfortunate happened to your husband, it would be your sole responsibility to raise both the children?" Dobrich gently asked Jennifer, whose family did not want their last names published.

"Will you provide for their emotional well-being?" Dobrich asked.

Jim Nye, deputy director of field services administration for the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) was introduced by Cass County FIA Director Christopher Kadulski. "Basically, he's in charge of almost everything that goes on in the state," said Kadulski, who also accompanied Nye to the St. Joseph County FIA in Centreville.

"We're making history today. This is our first state Adoption Day. Today, 34 courts representing 35 counties will finalize adoptions. Kids get new permanent families. We've got 240 finalizations today," Nye said.

"This is just wonderful for the kids and families. Thanks so much for opening your hearts and homes for these children. It sounds like a great match from what Judge Dobrich has indicated. It's so important to keep extended families together."

Nye said he and his wife adopted her niece in April.

"Many thanks to our FIA staff who facilitated adoptions, the court staff, particularly the judge, who's so instrumental," Nye said.

Kadulski said, "The children we serve have been traumatized in many ways. The birth family connection has been broken and so have their spirits. As a judge," he told Dobrich, "you build families and bring back faith, trust and hope to children. You put the puzzle of their lives back together, building one family at a time. By building strong families, you are promoting a healthier community for everyone."

Dobrich, shedding tears of joy, said, "We have a lot of sad things that happen in this courtroom. This is the best part of the whole job," which is why each adoption is celebrated with a personalized cake from Felpausch.

Michigan Adoption Day was scheduled for Nov. 25 - two days before Thanksgiving - with the theme "Giving Thanks for Families."

Dobrich was part of a work group convened by Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Maura Corrigan, in cooperation with FIA.

Their task, the judge said, "was to study what was going wrong with the Michigan adoption system. Actually, we found that things weren't going wrong, but we would like to make things go better. The work group noted that in Michigan, as of July 31, 2003, there were 12,673 children who were temporary wards of the court as a result of child protective proceedings. As of this date, a total of 19,490 children were in foster care, so there's an additional 7,000 who are in foster care who may be delinquent wards."

At the end of FY 2000, Dobrich said, Michigan had 4,615 permanent state wards available for adoption, with 283 adoptions finalized in that fiscal year.

"The fact is, too many of our children are waiting to be adopted," Dobrich said. "We hope this event will help educate the public about the adoption process and the number of children awaiting permanent and loving homes."

National Adoption Day, observed on Nov. 22, showed 126,000 children in foster care in the United States while waiting to be adopted.

Half a million were temporary wards - "just an astronomical number," the judge said, "larger than the populations of Wyoming and Montana."